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Creating an Activist Voice: Re-storying the Self in the Light of Contemporary Feminist Understandings of Power and Subjectivity

Lekkie Hopkins¹

Each person has a personal history, and it is in the intersection of this history with collective situations, discourses and identities that the problematic relationship between structure and praxis, and between the social and the individual, lies (Henrietta Moore, 1994: 49).

I'm tired of the voice that comments, never admitting that what it's striving for is wisdom. It's the voice I learned in the universities asserting itself again, the voice I've lived by, constrained as much as enabled (Drusilla Modjeska 1990: 291).

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From 1992-1995 Sandy Newby was enrolled as a mature aged undergraduate student in a course in human services and applied women's studies at an Australian University. In this paper, in an attempt to uncover the complex processes of re-storying the self in the light of contemporary feminist understandings of subjectivity and power, I explore some dimensions of Sandy's encounter with such knowledges during her time at university. The narrative focus of this paper is both on Sandy's engagement with the learning process and on my own experience as a feminist teacher and researcher/biographer. I draw particularly on the work of Friedman (1998), Grosz (1992), Healy (1999), Irigaray (1993), Modjeska (1990), Probyn (1993) and Trinh (1989) to suggest the inseparability of rationality, the passions, and the life force in coming to understand knowledges which enable the re-storying of the self to occur.

There has been much discussion in the literature about transformations which occur for women when they encounter feminist scholarship. (Maher, 2001; Stanley, 1997; Morley & Walsh, 1996; Aaron & Walby, 1991). We know that women students, particularly mature aged women students, are said to find courses in women's studies *transformative*. Indeed, Louise Morley cites Janice Raymond (1985: 53) to endorse her own observation that many women express their delight in the subject in terms of a quasi-religious conversion (Morley, 1993: 122). Further, Drucilla Cornell, in her 1993 text called *Transformations*, argues for a new understanding of social change, which focuses on the tie between political and individual transformation (Cornell, 1993). In this paper I prefer to use the term *re-storying*, for its emphasis on the conscious process of integrating new material to reflect on the same evidence, the same material, the same fabric of a life, anew. Such emphasis on re-storying also avoids the suggestion of complete metamorphosis, and (accurately) allows for the possibility for the old story-lines to lurk, unbidden, in the dark recesses of the psyche. The impetus for such re-storying, I argue, is found in the complex relation between knowledge, experience and teaching/learning processes. Whether my students hook into notions of pain or pleasure or both, it is clear

that their encounters with feminist knowledges affect their (multiple) notions of who they are and what they can do.

Gathering material for this exploration has meant, in addition to casting my net wide into the arena of feminist poststructuralist scholarship, talking to a range of people

Poststructuralism points to the continual co-creation of self and social science: they are known through each other. Knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges.

Poststructuralism suggests we must reflect on our method to explore new ways of knowing Laurel Richardson (1997: 89).

whose lives intersect with Sandy's life. I have spent many hours talking with Sandy, with and without a tape recorder between us. We met weekly for four months in 1997 to record a series of discussions about her early life, her adult life before she attended university, her university period, and her life since then. Her university essays became crucial archival material. The process of gathering information was reflexive from the beginning. Almost as soon as the tape recordings were made, I transcribed them, and gave copies to Sandy. Each week we talked about the tape of a couple of weeks earlier, so that the process became one of back-tracking, doubling up, re-visiting old territory while pushing on into the uncharted waters of her current interactions with the worlds of work, play, family, and friendships.

In order to uncover multiple perspectives and stories on Sandy and her life, with her permission I talked to various members of her family, as well as to her student

contemporaries, her friends, her partner, her work colleagues, and my own academic colleagues who taught her and who worked closely with me in teaching in the undergraduate programme in applied women's studies.

This paper begins with Sandy's own voice, taken directly from an interview transcript. The paper also contains archival material in the form of essays written by Sandy as a student, and the voices, real and imagined, of several of the other participants in this study. My own voice as narrator, teacher and researcher is heard throughout.

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In reading over my account of her university life towards the end of my research and writing process, Sandy says: 'What my university education did for me, is it gave me new ways to read the events of my life. It's true when I say that for a long time, for years and years before I went to uni, I actually used to feel I was outside my own life, looking in. For so long I couldn't get into it. But then at uni what I had been in the past didn't need to limit me any more. What mattered now was the potential I had - to use my emotions as well as my intellect, to think creatively, to learn more, to open my eyes to what people had been thinking and doing for centuries and to what we might be able to think and do in the future. And you and Ann were crucial in that process. It's not that you told me what to think. I found lots to think about in all the reading I did, and in all the talking I did with everyone else who was there, all the other students and lecturers I spent time with. It's more that being with you both gradually gave me new ways to see. You both seemed to listen to me, to respect what I had to say, and to really kind of know me in ways nobody had known me before.'

‘I can see, looking through all this stuff, that I always seem to fall back into humanist discourses. I know I always say, ‘This feels like the real me’, or ‘For the first time I felt truly myself.’ But I can’t seem to help that, and in a sense it doesn’t even matter. What does matter to me now is that at uni I felt loosened, freed up, so that the idealised me that I carried inside, the me who was possible and potential, was now within my sights. I could reach towards her and know she was possible.’

Later, she says to me slowly, ‘In a way it was like being loved. I felt held, trusted. Well, loved, really. Yes, I’d say I felt loved by you both.’

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When we consider, with Davies, (1991: 42) that We can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of the available discourses ... [we find that] our patterns of desire that we took to be fundamental indicators of our essential selves (such as the desire for freedom or autonomy or for moral rightness) signify little more than the discourses, and the subject positions made available within them, to which we may have access (Karen Healy, 1999: 118).

Louise Morley writes of the development of an ‘oppositional consciousness’ in her students (which Haraway defines as *the skills for reading webs of power by those refused stable membership in the social categories of race, class or sex*) to describe the move from disappointment and powerlessness to a capacity to act (Morley, 1993: 123). Although I admire and enjoy Morley’s careful articulation of her working practices, I find that the term ‘oppositional’ implies a rather more fixed and static location than I would wish to use.

In unravelling the practical implications of clinging to oppositional thinking, Australian social worker Karen Healy (1999) cites Michelle Fine (1994: 80) who warns, *If poststructuralism has taught us anything, it is to beware the frozen identity, ... to suspect the binary, to worry the clear distinction*. With Healy, I accept that poststructuralism alerts activists to the very serious simplifications on which a whole suite of oppositions embedded in emancipatory practice rely. Such oppositions cited by Healy include: *power of workers/ clients; middle class/working class; privileged/poor; technical knowledge/lived experience; voice/silence; researcher/researched; worker/service user; powerful/powerless* (Healy, 1999: 122).

In my own teaching practice, I attempt to overcome such a binary tussle by using locational discourses to conceptualise the speaking position of both worker and client, or,

The Flat Earth Theory: The earth is round and flat at the same time. This is obvious. That it is round appears indisputable; that it is flat is our common experience, also indisputable. The globe does not supersede the map; the map does not distort the globe (Jeanette Winterson, 1990: 81).

indeed, of both teacher and student, in any interaction. One of my crucial teaching strategies is to suggest that whether she speaks in opposition to a prevailing discourse, or in affinity with one or with many, every woman sits in the centre of her own story at the moment of utterance. Such conceptual location, I find, creates the conditions of possibility for the speaker to recognise the reciprocally central location of even that other with or against whom she speaks. Or, to adapt Lamberti's terminology (cited in Yuval-Davis, 1993: 9) it facilitates the capacity to understand and use the positions implicit in the notions of 'taking root' in a feminist ethics and 'shifting' to form

temporary alliances while engaging in a politics of coalition. The vital skills to read webs of power, whether from margin or centre, develop as the re-storying process occurs.

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As a feminist academic responsible for teaching feminist knowledges to (mostly) mature aged undergraduate women, I am fascinated by the ways we come to know, and by the changes which occur for us when we absorb new ways of seeing, new knowledges. I am fascinated, too, by the ways in which we shift the focus from pain to possibilities. A

Stories written as resistance narratives are weak representations: reactive stories that keep alive the dominant culture in the minds of the non-dominant (Richardson, 1997: 78).

critical idea which underpins my academic practice is that feminist research need not be concerned only with women's pain, but that the pleasures of teaching and learning, and the passions we bring to these, are equally worthy of discussion (McWilliam, 1997; Richardson, 1997; Cixous & Calle-Guber, 1997).

Shifting the emphasis away from stories of oppression, and onto stories of possibilities, both theoretically and practically, has been a central characteristic of my feminist teaching practice. Students often report that such an emphasis makes this applied women's studies programme seem different from other similar programmes: it's less fierce than they expected of a women's studies programme, some say, less intimidating, more welcoming to ordinary women wanting to make some sense of their lives. Shifting the emphasis in this way, though, is a delicate manoeuvre, necessarily undertaken with care. My reading of Drusilla Modjeska's fictionalised biography, *Poppy* (1990) has given me theoretical insight into the ways in which pain and pleasure coexist, in mutual reciprocity. That we do not need to choose between the story of pleasure or the story of pain is one of the first aha! moments many of our students recall.

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As part of my research into the ways in which Sandy has taken up feminist knowledges in her journey towards becoming a trade union activist, I meet with my friend and colleague Ann Ingamells to discuss our reactions to working with Sandy as a student. The ongoing conversations I have had Ann about the teaching we each do in this applied women's studies programme, and the kinds of energies we bring to it, suggest to me strongly that

we each in our different ways try to create a context which actively contests the notion of a split between rationality and the passions and the life force.

‘So really,’ I say during one of our discussions, ‘in terms of text and narrative and the storying of a life, we’re talking about ways of seeing differently, ways of reading the texts of their own lives differently?’

‘Well yes, I guess,’ says Ann. ‘It’s about seeing differently and then working out what that means for how to act, how to be, in the rest of your life from then on.’

We are each fascinated by the ways in which our students seem to embody new knowledges. Trinh’s notion that *it is a perversion to consider thought the product of one specialized organ, the brain, and feeling, that of the heart* (1989: 36) is embedded in our teaching practices.

Ann’s immediate response to my question about what she remembers most about working with Sandy is to look at the crucial connections Sandy makes with others as part of her learning processes. ‘What I remember most about Sandy,’ Ann says, ‘is her willingness to engage everyone, including me, in her learning. How I teach best, I know, is to engage in a learning process with people that’s quite multi-dimensional. It’s not anything that I do in a lecture or anything I do in a tutorial. It’s about an engagement that’s about knowing who this person is, and where they’re going, and the sorts of connections that can be made around all of that. I don’t mean ... When I say it’s about knowing who this person is, I don’t mean that in a totalizing kind of way. I mean that I know who this person is at that moment. It’s about “is-ness”, about being. Kind of like getting a sense of their being, and engaging with that. And there aren’t very many public and private boundaries around all of that I don’t think, in the sense that I notice that even now with students, that when people are engaged in a learning process, they may think they’re writing a social policy assignment and they gather in their research for that, but at the same time they reflect on their lives and it all becomes part of that stuff that they’re doing, and facilitating that is being ready to engage with what seem to be important parts of the process.’

This resonates with my own experience. From my perspective, Ann is talking about intuition here. Being able to glimpse the “is-ness” of someone at a particular moment, I think, is about being open to their energy, and being willing to connect at an intuitive level. It is no wonder I enjoy these conversations with Ann. It is not every colleague who will take intuition so seriously.

We talk about the joy of working with a student like Sandy, about her capacity to take risks, personal risks, exposing her vulnerabilities to the scrutiny of her own analysis and to that of others.

‘I think one of the most stunning moments in my teaching career’, I say to Ann, ‘was in that second year class where Sandy did a seminar presentation on her experience of leaving her marriage and her children. It was a most courageous performance. The

other students were very much in awe of her. And it was, with all her strength, it was really difficult to do, you could see it, but she just had to do it. And without diminishing any of it in any way, she honoured the process, the performance. And that then, as you say, established the target for everyone else, and established a kind of notion of possibilities, and the notion of the safety and the danger of taking risks but the desire to take risks in other people too. In a way it opened out for the whole class this notion that the personal is intensely political, and that to grow we must take risks, and a certain kind of courage can come with the finding of a voice. Altogether it was a thrilling moment.'

'And it sets the precedent that this is real work we're doing here in these feminist classrooms, this is not play-acting, this is real stuff,' says Ann. 'That's a real quality of leadership.'

'Yes it is, isn't it,' I reply. 'Something about the centredness and the seriousness with which she takes what it is, which she brings to the task.'

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The seminar presentation I referred to in my conversation with Ann was one in a unit which I taught called *Working With Women in Minority Groups*. The lecture series for that unit occurred within the broader context of historical understandings of the development of feminist activism in Australia in the past three decades. The lectures challenged taken-for-granted notions of power being monolithic and immovable and embedded in institutional structures. They also challenged notions of personal identity being coherent, predetermined and fixed.

In the lecture series I drew on the work of Australian scholars Jan Pettman (1992), Anna Yeatman (1995), Catherine Waldby (1995) and Ien Ang (1995) among others, to argue that such postparadigmatic understandings of power and subjectivity created the need for a new and different suite of collective practices from those used in the past. To make spaces for (different) women to speak, students would have to be able to recognise and respect difference, align momentarily and strategically over sameness, and learn consciously to read and shift power in interpersonal and group encounters. Such practices would be underpinned by a consciously held feminist ethics. Or, as Lamberti would have it, one 'takes root' in a feminist ethics and 'shifts' to form temporary alliances while engaging in a politics of coalition (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 9).

In the lecture series, I have argued, too, that the desire to create a positive, vibrant, energetic space from which every woman can speak her difference has emerged as a significant dimension of the feminist project, particularly in the last decade, with its emphasis on differences among women and the politics of representation.

To students learning to harness poststructuralist notions of power and identity to recognize difference, I stress that we must learn to replace aboutness with dialogue; stop ridiculous comparisons between women; confront dominations among women. No matter how marginalised any woman may seem to be, she is always, at the moment of articulation, at the centre of her own

Sensitivity to difference may recognise the variety and specificity of women's experience, and the resulting groups may become smaller and more particular (Pettman, 1992: 156).
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story. Or, as Susan Stanford Friedman argues,

To themselves, people made peripheral by the dominant society are not “marginal”, “other”. But to counter the narratives of their alterity produced by the dominant society, they must tell other stories that chart their exclusions, affirm their agency (however complicit and circumscribed) and continually (re)construct their identities (Friedman, 1998: 230).

Understanding this, I argue, is crucial for working across sites of difference, using reciprocity, empathy and respect.

Students' seminar presentations occurred within a context of these contemporary feminist investigations of ways to make spaces for (different) women from minority groups to speak. Students were required in their seminar papers to select a particular minority group of women and to write of the richness and complexity of these women's lives. Their papers had also to demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which women from this minority group are marginalised by mainstream discourses. In order to begin to grapple with feminist notions of working across sites of difference, students were encouraged in their seminar presentations for this unit to draw on their own experience to articulate the dimensions of being positioned on the margins. Sandy's seminar presentation had a profound effect on her listeners.

It was 1986. America's Cup fever was gripping Perth and it seemed we were all caught up in the fervour that was the eighties. I had a 'model' marriage - a devoted husband and two lovely daughters. I had a casual job to supplement the family income and my husband's career was on track with a recent promotion. We had built and moved in to a new home in the suburbs in 1983. For all intents and purposes my life was set.

But I had a dark secret. A place within me where the inner struggle to survive was a daily familiarity. I had always been told I was headstrong and that my radical opinions were inappropriate, so I deduced that the difficulties I was experiencing were mine. So, never being one to take commitment lightly, I set about fulfilling the predetermined expectations that lay before me.

As described so exquisitely by Adrienne Rich (1979) I experienced both deep joy and indescribable agony as I tried to fulfil my mothering destiny. At every step I fell short of the 'ideal mother' that existed inside my head. Guilt became the mother of my existence. My sense of isolation, both from myself, and the experience I came to view as the real life that lay somewhere out there in the real world, created a spiral of confusion and anger. Depression became a constant companion and tears flowed endlessly.

In 1986 I left my marriage. I left my children with my husband. Simone was 6 and Celeste was only 2. As I remember it, my reasoning went something like this...

I have to have freedom or I will die... I am a bad person and a failed mother.

I don't know what lies ahead for me and I know I am unstable... the children need stability.

I am hurting my husband so much by leaving, I will destroy him if I take the children too...

My husband has a good income and will be able to support the children. I have no qualifications, I don't want my children to live in poverty...

I suffered an immediate loss of all my support networks - friends and family. I lost my identity. The housewife role had never felt comfortable but it had been my source of status. In the years that followed, my search for identity and my emotional vulnerability led me into relationships and experiences which were, at times, devastating.

Having stepped out of my mould I found myself in quicksand. I had never lived away from home, and my emotional survival skills were very limited. I lost my point-of-reference. Men saw me as single because my children didn't live with me. I saw myself as a person with irrevocable ties to my daughters. Other women were harsh judges. I gave up trying to explain or be truthful. Often, I chose not to let people know I had children and yet they were and still are an enormous part of my life. I was always committed and available to my girls.

Initially, my husband felt that my sharing a rental house with other people added up to a bohemian lifestyle which could not be tolerated. Although I was having constant contact visits with my daughters, I had to prove stability to him before we could come to an arrangement about weekend visits. This took about six months. Both of us were reluctant to use the legal system for our negotiations. My family rallied around him to support him through the crisis. My mother cooked for him and helped with the children. The realisation that access to their grandchildren was no longer secure forced my parents to re-negotiate their relationship with my husband.

I remember the night my grandfather on my father's side died. Unknowingly, I called my father for a chat, which at that time was not a common occurrence. My timing was impeccable. The rest of my family, including my husband and children, were gathered at his house because of the death. No-one had called me. I had never felt like more of an outcast.

After the separation, I was consumed and disabled by the guilt I was feeling. I had left everything behind. When we finally did settle our property, I took the minimum amount possible so that Alex wouldn't have to sell the house and to ensure the family's stability. I tried to pursue joint custody but was advised by my lawyer that this was not an option (something I found out much later was not correct). So settlement included joint guardianship and sole custody to my husband.

While I had always worked (casually or part-time after my children were born), without qualifications I was receiving wages at the lower end of the scale and my rental

commitments were large. Other than the early days, I have rented accommodation that was suitable for my children to come and stay with me. This has been every weekend, some mid-week and some holidays since the early days of negotiating. The rent was often more than I could realistically afford, but for me, providing an appropriate environment for the girls was paramount. When I did secure a long term position, I was employed as a functions and outdoor catering co-ordinator which was very demanding of my time, including weekends. Trying to balance work with weekend child visits was a nightmare.

The unrelenting economic hardship I was suffering placed additional pressure on my somewhat shaky emotional health. The fear surrounding being the absent parent has created an instability, which has been difficult to manage. The degree of suffering and long term sadness I have felt culminated, as recently as last year, in treatment for post-traumatic stress syndrome.

In retrospect, I can see that I had to re-conceptualise what my role was, who I was. In the time since I have been a non-custodial mother, I have learned many things - about myself, about the society in which I live, about how to be a mother when you are viewed as not being a mother. As I think back over the years, I can now identify my experiences as one of redefinition

*of my self concept
of myself in relation to my family and friends
of myself in relation to my husband
of myself in relation to my employers
of myself in relation to the state
of myself in relation to the ideology of motherhood.*

Over the years I have found myself mediating family problems for my husband and daughters and dealing with emotional difficulties as they arose - from afar. I have had to maintain a degree of contact with my husband which allowed me to involve myself in family relationships but which somehow created some distance. This has been very difficult. In some ways, it has felt like the marriage has not ended. I have been trying to find a space for myself which allows me to express my individuality but which displays the level of commitment to my daughters that I feel. They have always known of my love for them and connection to them.

Pain has been my constant companion, grief and loss my daily reality. Most of all has been the battle to allow me to be who I am and wanting people to see me as a person rather than categorising me according to my actions and their perceptions of them. Underpinning all of my efforts had been an internal process of peacemaking and understanding. I have tried to rise above my culturally ascribed 'proper' role and to express my individuality. Always present, however, is the inner critic, that quietly attacks. The part of me that struggles to come to terms with the actions of a mother who left her marriage. The part that seeks acceptance of myself, by myself. I have, at times, been my own harshest critic and yet I know that my actions arose out of a desire to end the

suffocation, to end what, for me, had become a nightmare. The cost, however, has been great.

In her analysis of this story from her own life, Sandy explored the limitations of pre-postmodernist feminist tendencies to generalise while theorising the category *women*:

Without accommodating different speaking positions within its framework, feminism in the past has allowed generalised representations of

women-as-a-category to permeate cultural consciousness. Thus, women's lives have been homogenised and many women's experiences and voices have been rendered invisible and inaudible, creating excluding practices rather than acting to include diversity. All women, therefore, are judged and are controlled and affected by implication (Pettman, 1992). Mothers-who-are-not-mothers become a threat to dominant voices, and to society as a whole, by stepping outside prescribed ideals.

First she dies. Then she loves.

I am dead. There is an abyss. The leap. That Someone takes. Then, a gestation of self - in itself, atrocious. When the flesh tears, writhes, rips apart, decomposes, revives, recognises itself as a newly born woman, there is a suffering that no text is gentle or powerful enough to accompany with a song. Which is why, while she's dying - then being born - silence. (Cixous, 1991: 36)

She concluded her paper with a list of strategies that feminist workers could use to connect across difference with mothers-who-are-not-mothers.

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I know from my own response and from that of others that this has been a big moment for us all. It occurs to me now that I can read Sandy's narration of this episode in her life in terms of the conflicting discourses and desires it represents. Here is the quintessential feminist dilemma: the choices she makes are framed within a feminist ethics: responsibility to her (free) self is her primary achievement. Her struggles are to negotiate across the gaps between her self and other selves, to persuade those others to read her as still responsible, loving, and caring, although she has shattered forever the myth of happy, heterosexual families and good mothers. In terms of a recent paper about desire by Australian feminist scholars Susan Dormer and Bronwyn Davies (2001), Sandy's decision to leave her family acts on the desires for freedom which most women have, and cuts across the equally powerful desire to be recognised as a *good woman*. The good woman is aligned with the unfree woman. Desires conflict. Goodness equates with entrappedness; freedom equates with badness; autonomy conflicts with the ideology of connection.

The huge shift that Sandy makes, and that many in her audience may well have read as courageous, is that she has been able to re-read, re-cognise, re-narrate her actions using feminist knowledges which allow her to bring into being a personally and politically held feminist ethics underpinning her decision to leave her marriage. She reads and narrates her actions against the grain of all those discourses which would position her as bad mother, abandoning mother, inadequate woman. She inhabits a space which says simply, My actions were informed by love and respect: love of the self (*I had to escape or I*

would die); love of my daughters (*the children need stability*); respect for my husband (*I will destroy him if I take the children too*). At the same time, she remains her own harshest critic (*always present ...is the inner critic, that quietly attacks*).

The price she pays is high, as her story of the night of her grandfather's death reveals. The glimpses of detail from the daily life of the family which has closed ranks against her (*my mother cooked for him and helped with the children; I had to prove stability to my husband before we could come to an arrangement about weekend visits*) serve to emphasize Sandy's marginalisation and exclusion. And yet in spite of the pain of such marginalisation, she knows deeply that her decision has been responsible, ethical, and right. Her decision holds within it the glimpse of a future which would have been impossible without her move.

My reading of the significance of this moment, in educational terms, is that it rests in the relationship between speaker and audience. In this classroom, Sandy had a space in which she could powerfully speak the unspeakable, the abject. She could speak the story of the bad woman and not be rejected, but recognised as brave, and as offering truths for herself and for others. Her voice, as Probyn (1993) suggests it must, came directly from the interstices of her feminist knowledges and her experience. Additionally, she writes against the grain of the kinds of feminist knowledges that celebrate motherhood as an inevitable source of power and satisfaction. It is not surprising that her audience was electrified.

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As researcher/biographer, in an acknowledgment that "truth" or "reality" cannot be conveyed except in a way which simultaneously reveals their relativity and their relationship to the voice which speaks them (Helen Thomson, 1994) I seek other responses to this moment of articulation in Sandy's life.

I talk to Lorna, media student *par excellence*. She's in her mid twenties: young for this course. Sometimes she wears squashy velvet hats to class. She has a vibrant personality. She stands out in a crowd. Her whole demeanour embraces difference. I know from observation that she and Sandy connected with each other quite strongly during this class, but I have not asked either of them how until now. Lorna's response, as it ought, takes me by surprise. 'I really liked and respected her as a person, and when she stood up and said those things about her kids and what had happened in their lives, it really blew me away, it changed my relationship with my own father and mother completely. My father had abandoned me when I was four, and I never saw him again until I was 19. I'd always seen it as abandonment, and I had always felt it was about me, that I wasn't a good enough child, because if I was he would have struggled to be with me. But Sandy's story made me rethink my parents' stories. Suddenly I saw them as people who had been struggling with their own lives. And I remember we were all just about crying. Very special. I can't even remember my own assignment for that class, but I remember hers.'

Lorna goes on, 'My Mum's not diagnosed but I'm sure she's manic depressive. I mean she'd have great sunny days and we'd go and do all these things, and then she'd be

drinking and down and trying to kill herself and stuff. In my autobiography I say I have healed the scars of my mother's disinterest. I call it disinterest, it's not abuse, or hatred or whatever, it's just disinterest. Her happiness in her life did not include her children. Strange. And I think that's another way I connected to Sandy's story, because she so obviously felt grief about her motherhood and her situation, and I felt y'know some people do want kids to start with.

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Almost two years after Sandy's seminar presentation, in August 1997, Sandy and I talk about that moment of articulation again:

Sandy: So yeah, there was ... towards the end of my university studies there was a definite claiming... The claiming process was huge in that unit, where I gave the talk about my experience in your class, about, y'know, the non-custodial parenting aspect of my life, and going public with that, because that was part of a very dark secret I rarely ever told anybody because of the judgment that always followed. And that was really a moment of claiming of who I was, to myself, or who I had been, or even in terms that Drusilla Modjeska would use, claiming and telling that particular story of that part of my life - acknowledging that being a non-custodial parent was also part of who I was. It was really hard. Well, you were there, you could see it was really hard for me to do that. I can see now that I used university in a way that was challenging and meaningful and scary I guess in a lot of ways...

It was interesting, the reaction of the class, because at that time I'd become fairly friendly with Verity who was in the class then, and she said to me afterwards, "I just couldn't look at you, because I would have been sobbing so loudly it would have ruined everything", and um ...who was the other young woman who was the film-maker in that class?... fantastic personality.Lek Oh! Lorna!

Sandy Yes, Lorna. We'd been skirting around the fringes of each other, and in fact she's a very powerful woman, and in some of the groups we'd been in together we didn't actually agree at all on the sort of positions that we'd have; and she came up to me afterwards, and she was ... she was really blown away, and she said, "Oh I'm just, I just don't know what to say, it's amazing, I would never have guessed that this had been your experience, and y'know it's changing the way I think about my whole life already.

It is clear from these transcripts that Sandy herself reads this performance as a significant moment in her storying of her life. The metaphors she uses are of release, of floodgates opening:

That was a huge day for me, because it really unlocked my heart that day. For some reason I took myself off to see *Priest*, the movie, that afternoon, on my own. It was a movie that I'd heard about, knew nothing about, but everyone said "You must see *Priest*". Well, by the time *Priest* was finished I was actually sobbing hysterically and couldn't stop, and actually I cried for about ten hours after that, I just, it was like the floodgates had opened, so I'd started some sort of release that had obviously needed to happen for a very very long time.

It is clear, too, that the metaphors she uses here and elsewhere are implicitly about moving from darkness into light: she was no longer *hiding*; her *dark secret* was *uncovered* and *out in the open*; she *could be an honest person* (in the light) *now*.

So the process of university is part of my healing, but also part of becoming an honest person, and not hiding. I still don't talk about that part of my life a lot, but I ... I can say it in conversation now without feeling like a horrible person. And that seminar presentation, coming clean in that way, certainly had a huge part to play in that. But I was also able to go to the feminist theory in my essay that I wrote to support it. That gave me a position on it, that I'd never had before, that said to me "Well this is how this happened to you." So there was an understanding there, that I didn't have before, and it was wonderful.

Lek: Mm, mm. The most wonderful kind of experience of integration and flowering ..
Sandy: Yes, it was. Yes, it was an amazing day, that. Scary stuff, though, but good stuff.

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What was it that was so significant about this seminar presentation for Sandy, in terms of her re-storying of herself to enable her emergence as a feminist activist able to understand the plays of power in working with and across difference to make changes?

The comments Sandy makes about her storying process draw me back to Trinh's (1989: 28) discussion of knowledge and consciousness and writing the self. Here Trinh draws on her experience of Eastern philosophies to argue that *thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, and the foot as it is of the brain*. She critiques Western self-satisfactions to argue that ego is an identification with the mind: *when ego develops, the head takes over and exerts a tyrannical control over the rest of the body*. She deftly eludes the Eastern / Western binary opposition then to offer a solution which once again takes us into the territory of reciprocity: *If it is a question of fragmenting so as to decentralize instead of dividing so as to conquer, then what is needed is perhaps not a clean erasure but rather a constant displacement of the two-by-two system of division to which analytical thinking is often subjected* (1989: 39).

Trinh also refers to the procedures which in Asia postulate not one, not two, but three centres in the human being: the intellectual (the *path*, connected with reason), the emotional (the *oth*, connected with the heart), and the vital (the *kath*, located below the navel, which radiates life. It directs vital movement and allows one to relate to the world with instinctual immediacy). *But, says Trinh, instinct(ual) immediacy here is not opposed to reason, for it lies outside the classical realm of duality assigned to the sensible and the intelligible. So does certain women's womb writing, which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart ... but allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness* (Trinh, 1989: 40).

Sandy's own comments on what happened for her on the day of her seminar presentation, and my subsequent reflections on that event, suggest that here we have an example of

someone who is beginning to bring together Trinh's three centres in the human being: the intellectual, the emotional, and the vital. Sandy framed her presentation intellectually within a suite of feminist knowledges which allowed her and her audience to understand her actions as necessary and ethical in her own terms; she spoke with authenticity out of her own experience of pain and grief (the vital); and, in her own words, performing in this way *really unlocked my heart*, so that after the presentation was over, *the floodgates opened and I cried and cried for about 10 hours*.

In terms of Elspeth Probyn's notion of *speaking with attitude*, Sandy's performance here can be seen to have *put into motion the doubledness of being and becoming* (Probyn 1993:163). In her performance she can be seen to have looked back not to wallow in her own misery, but to read it anew. Her authentic immersion in her own state of being, which allowed her to bring together Trinh's three ontological centres, can be seen to have propelled her to the edges of the known self, thrusting her, in Probyn's terms, into *the doubledness of being and becoming*.

Finally, in terms of Drusilla Modjeska's (1990) account of finding voice in *Poppy*, Sandy gave life to her story through contextualising it within feminist knowledges, and through acknowledging the complexity of tensions and storylines acting on her as the central character in the drama of her life: the good mother, the mother who leaves to save herself; the good wife, the wife who feels trapped; the lucky woman, the woman who is suffocating; the rebellious daughter, the daughter who seeks approval; the suffering woman, the woman who is shriveling up inside. That she gave a story to this complex background which acknowledged her pain and vulnerability as well as her strength and compassion, suggests to me that she was indeed speaking out of the interstices of knowledge and experience, finding a way to speak which somehow freed her from the constrictions and limitations of reading her life according to the old discourses which were so successful in drowning her in her own guilt.

In drawing unwaveringly on her experience and on her knowledges, both new and old, she becomes able to articulate the enormity of her pain and the complexity of her reasoning. She moves from margin to centre in her own storying of her life. She has spoken, and she has been heard. She knows the power of disruptive performance. Here, then, is what we might call an epiphanous moment in Sandy's university life. It is a moment in which she has truly blurred the author/subject binary.

*

In spite of the pain which often accompanied her emergence as feminist scholar and, later, as an activist, Sandy herself remembers her university days with great affection. "Well, so much happened to me while I was there. Oh, there was all sorts of stuff going on for me, personally. It was just a huge time. I mean, not only was the teaching supportive of who I could become and where I was at, but the friendships that we all developed were just really important to me.

I respected you and Ann so much, and I was coming from this position of no self esteem when I got there, and for me to accept that people like you both had respect for what I

was saying, it took me a long time to get my head around that. I couldn't imagine what it is that I was saying that you thought was good. It was like, why are these people talking to me like they respect what I'm saying? It was really like that for a long time."

"It's a reframing entirely of the self, and your way of communicating?" I suggest.

"Absolutely," she replies. "There were lots of amazing things that happened along the way. Sometimes I felt I was shedding layers and layers of old self. Sometimes it felt like being transformed. My lounge room was certainly transformed. During that first year unit in 1993 I remember I became really passionate about celebrating the women in our family. So I went to my Mum and also to my Dad and got hold of as many photos as I could. I framed them all, and created this photo gallery of our female line in the lounge

It is also necessary, if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women. There is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mothers' side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters... Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. (Irigaray, 1987b: 44).

custodial parent."

*

For Irigaray, the notion of reciprocity offers one of the most fruitful dimensions of intersubjective bonds. As Irigaray states so eloquently, "I don't dominate or consume you. I respect you (as irreducible). (Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 1995: 171). The "to" in her title [I Love TO You] maintains the intransitivity among persons, interpellation, speech, or interpersonal gifts (Moscovici, 1996: 25).

room. My girls were amazed. And it was a big moment when my Mum saw this line-up for the first time. But maybe the biggest moment of all was in your second year class in 1995 when I gave the seminar paper about the pain of being a non-

The processes of re-storying Sandy's life which began at university continued after she graduated. Sometimes these processes were strengthened by the kinds of interactions she had with feminist knowledges. In 1997, for example, in order to gather material for this research project, Sandy and I met weekly with a taperecorder between us. After each meeting I transcribed our tape, and the next week, I gave it to Sandy to take home to read. In this way, we often found ourselves discussing material from a conversation of two or three weeks ago. This process of talking, transcribing, reading and talking some more surprised us both with its capacity to make possible fresh insights into old stories. For Sandy, reading the text of our spoken conversations was sometimes a revelation: responding as reader to the text created from her own spontaneously spoken words seemed to create quite a new relationship between the unspoken text and the stories she could now tell.

During our research process, Sandy says to me, 'Feeling so powerful and so good about myself is an unfamiliar feeling for me. It's about taking back power, and it's about ownership, and it's about credibility. That's what was happening for me at uni, I was seeking credibility in my own eyes. And somehow now that seems to be happening too.'

*

When I told Richard I was thinking of writing Poppy's history, he asked me if I'd have enough evidence. It was a serious question and I took it seriously. I collected every scrap of paper she'd left (Drusilla Modjeska, 1990: 69).

In attempting to write Sandy's story, like the narrator of *Poppy*, I, too, have taken seriously the task of gathering archival evidence: I have photocopied, read and re-read every essay she wrote in the course of her university studies,

not in the expectation that these papers alone will tell the story of her engagement with new knowledges, but certainly in the expectation that they will give life to that story. I am fascinated by the twinned questions of how and what she came to know, and by the further question of how that affected her being. *To know is to be, as well as to have.*

In looking over Sandy's essays, I am struck by the combination of information, self-development, theory, and practical skills her course contained. Her course was officially a combination of applied women's studies and human services units, with electives in psychology and justice studies. (For an outline of Sandy's entire course, see APPENDIX 1.) What such a description of her course cannot convey is the life she breathed into it. It is clear from looking over these essays that Sandy was hungry for knowledge and hungry for ways to read experience.

Because I am looking for change, for transformation perhaps, for signs of the emergence of the strong, fiesty, steady, courageous woman I have come to know, as I read her work the story I tell myself is that almost every essay she wrote became yet another opportunity for pushing the limits, for reaching beyond what she knew into the often frightening, often exhilarating territory of whatever ways of knowing lay just out of sight. In every essay she seems totally engaged: every essay is written *as if her life depended on it*.

In a single day the mind can make a millpond of the oceans. Some people who have never crossed the land they were born on have traveled all over the world (Jeanette Winterson, 1990: 80)

Sandy's daughter Celeste remembers the intensity of essay writing times: 'There'd be paper spread all over the room - on the desk, on chairs, on the floor, and open books everywhere. And there'd be those yellow notelets stuck onto the computer screen. And over the back of Mum's chair in front of her computer she'd hang her red cardigan. That was the signal: It's assignment time - keep out! I'll never forget that red cardigan - it was a kind of talisman for her, I think.'

From the beginning, Sandy's learning was integrated with her own life experience: she rarely missed an opportunity to relate the topic she was writing about to her life, even where, as in the women's studies seminar presentation on her experience as a non-custodial mother, such investigation was painful in the extreme. From the beginning, too, she displayed an unerring sense of audience. Those essays bound for the psychology department were written in an appropriately impartial, third person voice; for me and my feminist colleagues, she wrote self-reflexive essays which were frequently warm and personally engaged; and where there was no relationship between her and the lecturer,

where there was little or no sense of audience, her voice wavers, falters, becomes unclear and unfocussed.

As I sift through these archival documents, it seems clear to me that Sandy learned as much through relationship as she did through reading: she appeared to have an intuitive sense of which lecturers were going to be most crucial in teaching her or helping her to discover whatever it was she next needed to know. She formed close relationships with Ann and with me, as well as with various of the sessional women's studies tutors and lecturers, including, specifically, the trade unionist Jo Gaines; she also formed a close working relationship with her justice studies lecturer, Charles; and wherever possible, it seems, she took the opportunity to work collaboratively with her student colleagues. It's clear, too, that she actively sought connections between often disparate approaches to similar concepts uncovered across the various units she was studying.

At university Sandy had been encouraged to view her own experience as part of an intense growth towards some sort of rebirth as a knowledgeable, politically aware, highly skilled facilitator. Feminist and human service readings of how to operate are based in *power to*, rather than *power over*. Human service units gave her a great amount of detail on how to plan, train, intervene at individual and community levels. She read widely about multiculturalism and service provision. Feminist units gave her a particular awareness of the relationship between her past, her present, and her future. Her sensitivity to individual lives and social and community frameworks was heightened and intricately explored.

*

In retrospect I see that for me, and perhaps for Ann too (although I cannot be sure) Sandy comes close to representing the ideal student. A student like Sandy who intuitively grasps the significance of being free to bring together rationality, the passions and the life force, rather than holding them in opposition and having to choose between them, begins to embody the pedagogical ideals on which our programme has become based. She uses the safe spaces we have created to push the limits of her knowing about herself and about the world. She takes risks; she absorbs feminist understandings about ways to make knowledges; she names and uncovers a feminist ethics which underpins her actions; she re-reads her recent life story in terms of her newly articulated ethical base.

I recall that Sandy herself has named the experience of working with Ann and with me as one of being loved: *I felt held, trusted. Well, loved, really. Yes, I'd say I felt loved by you both*. Such a statement evokes Irigaray's call to create a woman-to-woman sociality as the prerequisite to the emergence of the woman as subject.

What is proper to the crisis philosophy is undergoing is the challenge of the primacy of rationality, the resurgence of interest in the body, the affects, the passions, the irrational, are so many manifestations of this 'crisis' of rationality, which constantly fissures the horizon of our conceptual context (Braidotti, 1991: 36).

In Irigaray's terms, Sandy's engagement with feminist knowledges allowed her to connect with the mother by linking back and back to a genealogy of women, while still holding the hand of the (rational) father. Further, like Irigaray's subject-in-process, Sandy too is a subject in dialogue, engaged with the other. My reading of Sandy's emergence

at university confirms my intuitive endorsement of Irigaray's claim that *love is the mediator between the self and knowledge: it is love which leads to knowledge... It is love which leads the way and is the path, both* (Irigaray, 1993a: 21).

As both researcher and biographer, though, I have to remind myself, as I create this astonishing success story where pedagogical ideals become manifest in one body, that the Sandy I create here is merely one of many Sandys who co-exist: Sandy the scholar; Sandy the child; Sandy the relinquishing mother; Sandy the headstrong daughter; Sandy the larrikin; Sandy the friend. Dark foetal Sandy, coiled tight in bleak and utter despair; shining Sandy, emerging from a churning ocean like the figurehead on the prow of a Viking ship, breasts and hair streaming water, triumphant, fierce, strong. In suggesting these Sandys with the merest whisper or the loudest shout I do not have to choose between the one and the others.

The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body. The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once (Jeanette Winterson, 1990: 80).

Perhaps there are no others: always the one and always the many, all at once. It is the task of each of us as reader to become narrator, to create, fleetingly, a story out of this typically complex life. Perhaps the only thing we can say for certain is that at university Sandy's intelligence was respected and admired. That she took every chance to re-story her life in a context which actively contested the notion of a

split between rationality and the passions and the life force is the dimension of her story which I find most fascinating, and the one to which I return again and again.

Bread for one yen, says the Japanese proverb. For the other yen, white hyacinths (Modjeska 1990: 12).

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APPENDIX 1

Sandy Newby's course, a Bachelor of Social Science with a major in Human Services and a minor in Applied Women's Studies, contained the following units:

YEAR 1

CBS 1103 Introduction to Social Analysis
CBS 1105 Interpersonal Skills
CBS 1162 Legal Issues in Community Services
HSA 1101 Introduction to Human Services
HSA 1120 Policy Studies in Human Services
PSY 1140 Lifespan Development
WMS 1101 A Woman's Place in Society
WMS 1102 Psychology of Women

YEAR 2

BHS 2206 Helping Skills
CBS 2165 Community Development
CBS 2240 Adult: Midlife to Old Age
HAB 2213 Individual Program Design 2
HSA 2101 Family and Culture
HSA 2110 Individual Program Design
WMS 2202 Women, Family and Ideology
WMS 2204 Working with Women in Minority Groups

YEAR 3

HSA 3110 Human Services Management 1
HSA 3112 Planning and Services Programs
HSA 3113 Social Program Evaluation
HSA 3114 Training and Team Management
WMS 3301 Women and Work
WMS 3304 Working with Groups

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